

LESSONS FROM EXODUS
YAHWEH: THE JEALOUS GOD
Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road
Plymouth, Michigan 48170
Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 11.18.2001

O! beware, my lord, of jealousy;
It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on.

With these words, Othello is warned. In William Shakespeare's tragedy, which bears the name of the story's central character, Othello is a Moor who commands the Venetian forces. He marries Desdemona, who is the daughter of a Venetian senator. The devilish Iago leads Othello to believe that his wife, Desdemona, is unfaithful to him. Inflamed with jealousy, Othello smothers his wife, and then—in the end—he kills himself. Jealousy, “the green-eyed monster,” is the only victor. *Othello*—it is a dark, dismal depiction of an incessant and irrational jealousy that ends in tragedy.

“Jealous” . . . “Jealousy”—most of us, if not all of us, do not think positive thoughts when we hear these words. To us, jealousy is a smothering and stifling possessiveness; it is passion that has lost its senses and its self-control. It is bad. It is a monster.

And so, when we read in our English Bibles that God is “a jealous God,” what are we to think? Does this mean that our God is a monster? I do not believe that our God is a menacing monster who suspiciously stalks us with the intent to smother us. In other words, our God is *not* an Othello. But having said that, I do not want to be naïve. My sermon title, *Yahweh: The Jealous God*, probably makes a poor first impression.

Five times in the Hebrew Bible Yahweh is described as El Qanna (אֱלֹהֵי קַנָּא)—“the jealous God.”¹ These occurrences are found in Exodus, which is the book that we are studying, and in Deuteronomy. For the sake of time, we are going to focus on the occurrences in the Book of Exodus. As you will see, we will study two pivotal passages: God's giving of the Ten Commandments, and God's re-establishment of the covenant

¹Exod 20:5; 34:14; Deut 4:24; 5:9; 6:15; cf. Josh 24:19 & Nah 1:2.

after Israel's sin of worshipping the golden calf. But before we do that, please bear with me as I rehearse some raw data. Regarding the underlying Hebrew term for God's jealousy, the adjective (קָנָא—*qanno* ') is used twice, the noun (קִנְיָה—*qin'ah*) is used twenty-four times, and the verb (קָנָה—*qn* ') is used six times. My reason for reciting this data is that I want you to realize that the portrayal of *Yahweh as the Jealous God* is pervasive throughout the Old Testament.

Ok, let's look to Exodus chapter 20, beginning at verse 1. (Once again, I remind you that the translations I will read are my own.)

Then God spoke all these words, saying: "I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods in My presence.

"You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in the heavens above, or that is on the earth below, or that is in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down in worship to them nor shall you serve them, because I, Yahweh your God, am El Qanna (אֱלֹהֵי קָנָא), punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generations of those who reject Me, but lavishing loyal-love to a thousand [generations] of those who love Me and obey My commandments" (Exod 20:1-6).

Here we have the first two of what we refer to as the Ten Commandments. The "what" of the commandments is: no other gods and no idols. The "why" of the commandments is: "because I, Yahweh your God, am El Qanna (אֱלֹהֵי קָנָא)—the Jealous God." It is possible to translate the first commandment as follows: "You shall not have any other gods in defiance of me."² In the Ancient Near Eastern World, all covenants made with a major power for protection specified that there could only be one Protector. To hedge one's bets and seek for the protection of another great power as well was an act of rebellion. It was defiance of the protecting power and a grave breach of the covenant.

Now, let's turn to chapter 34 of Exodus and read verses 1 through 16.

And Yahweh said to Moses, "Chisel out for yourself two stone tablets like the first ones, and I will inscribe upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you shattered. Be ready by morning, and in the morning come up to Mount Sinai and present yourself there to Me, on the top of the mountain. No one else is to come up with you; indeed, no one else is to be seen anywhere on the mountain; not even the flocks and herds may graze anywhere near this mountain."

²Translation suggestion by Denis Baly, *God and History in the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Row), 3.

So [Moses] chiseled out two stone tablets like the first ones. Then Moses set off early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, exactly as Yahweh had commanded him, and he carried in his hands the two stone tablets. Yahweh came down in a cloud, and He stood there with [Moses] and called out the name Yahweh. Then Yahweh passed in front of Moses and called out: “Yahweh! Yahweh!—a God compassionate³ and gracious,⁴ slow to anger,⁵ over-flowing with loyal-love⁶ and faithfulness,⁷ extending loyal-love to a thousand [generations], taking away guilt and transgression and sin; yet, [a God] certainly not neglecting just punishment, punishing the children and the children’s children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generations.”

Immediately, Moses hurriedly bowed down toward the earth and prostrated himself in worship. Then he said, “Please, if I have found favor in Your eyes, Lord, please go, Lord, with us, even though this is a stubborn [lit.: stiffnecked] people. Forgive our guilt and our sin, and take us for Your own special possession!”

And so [Yahweh] said, “All right. I hereby make a covenant. In the sight of all your people I will do wondrous works the likes of which have not even been imagined in all the earth or in any nation. And all the peoples around you will witness the work of Yahweh, that what I am doing with you is awesome. Mark well what I command you this day. Now watch Me!—as I drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Beware of making a covenant with those who live in the land into which you are going, so that they do not become a snare among you. Instead, you must tear down their altars completely, and shatter their sacred pillars utterly, and cut down their holy poles to the ground;⁸ for you must not bow down in worship to another god, because Yahweh’s very name is Qanna (קָנָן)—He is El Qanna (אֱלֹהֵי קָנָן)—and He does not want you making a covenant with those who live in the land. For when they prostitute themselves to their gods and sacrifice to their gods, they will invite you and you will eat their sacrifices. And when you take wives from among their daughters for your sons, their daughters will prostitute themselves to their gods and will cause your sons to prostitute themselves to their gods” (Exod 34:1-16).

In a future lesson, we will return to this text—especially verses 6 and 7—at which time we will explore the topic of “Yahweh: The God of Grace.” Speaking of grace, do not overlook a very significant reversal of phrases that we find in the two passages we have

³רַחוּם (*rakhum*).

⁴חַנּוּן (*khannun*).

⁵אָרֶךְ אַפַּיִם (*'erekh 'appayim*—lit.: long of nose).

⁶חֶסֶד (*kheshedh*).

⁷אֱמֶת (*'emeth*).

⁸Translation of the first part of this sentence suggested by John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 3 (Waco: Word, 1987), 456-457: “The three imperfect verbs of this verse have the added emphasis of the ‘paragogic *nun*’ . . .”

just read. In Exod 20, God's punishment is mentioned first and His grace is mentioned second. To violate the covenant is to incur God's wrath; to keep the covenant is to be a recipient of God's love. In Exod 34, God's grace is mentioned first and His punishment is mentioned second. In spite of Israel's sin of worshipping the golden calf, God is taking the initiative to re-establish His covenant with Israel. God is gracious and He is forgiving; however, Israel must not take God's grace for granted. It is not "cheap grace." God will punish those who willfully breach the covenant. Because Yahweh is a gracious God, He cannot ignore the covenant; and so, He remains faithful even when His people do not. Because Yahweh is a jealous God, He cannot ignore the golden calf, for He demands uncompromising and exclusive loyalty.

Jealousy *can be* a good thing. It is a good thing when it describes the emotional response to a relationship that is being jeopardized. Othello's jealousy was bad. It was bad because it was unfounded and irrational. But, had it been the case that Desdemona *was* unfaithful to Othello, then we would likely respond by saying something like, "He had every reason to be upset!" It is a good thing that Yahweh is a jealous God. He is not aloof and detached from the world of human beings. On the contrary! Yahweh is a God who is deeply involved in human affairs and who vigorously seeks a relationship with us. To assert that Yahweh is El Qanna, is to affirm that He is *not* indifferent to the infidelity of His people, anymore than a loving husband is indifferent to an unfaithful wife. Israel's "affair" with any god or gods other than Yahweh is, in the blunt language of Exod 34, prostitution—"they prostitute themselves to their gods." Yahweh's fierce jealousy is the manifestation of His faithful love when that love has been spurned and spit upon. In humans, jealousy can be selfish and senseless; in God, jealousy is pure love.

Yahweh's violent jealousy, which tolerates no rival, is without parallel in the religious literature of the Ancient Near Eastern World. In that world, a fundamental religious tolerance prevailed. In fact, in *one* temple *different* gods could be worshipped. It was like going to Baskin-Robbins: one place, lots of flavors. But unlike the pagan gods, Yahweh's jealousy is not the envy of other deities and His jealousy is not directed against the idols—it is directed against the disloyal covenant partner. When Yahweh is described as El Qanna, it is in the context of covenant and in the context of other gods—it is in contexts where Israel's promised loyalty is questioned. Because Israel has pledged

her allegiance and affections to Yahweh, adoration of any other god is adultery. For Yahweh to call Himself a jealous God is His way of saying, “I will have nothing less than your full devotion, and you will have nothing less than all My love.”

Rightly understood, the concept of a jealous God flies in the face of our post-modern world. In an age when “you can have it your way,” from hamburgers to lifestyles to spirituality, a God who demands exclusive devotion and who dictates how He is to be worshipped, is a primitive, narrow-minded, self-centered deity best forgotten or, at the most, best treated as a religious relic of the past. Such a deity is smothering and stifling at best, and oppressive and offensive at worst. What we need is a god worthy of our times. (Or so we are told.)

In a recent edition of *The Detroit News*, there was an article entitled “Secular Spirituality Finds Its Place in the World.” Listen as I read some excerpts.

Not so long ago, the thought that nonreligious people could be spiritual was inconceivable. . . . But times have changed. . . . Spirituality “talk” has shifted from the pursuit of salvation in the next world to the pursuit of happiness in this world. . . . Secular spirituality is more interested in the experience of meaning than in the experience of God. It is more interested in discovering the power within than in discovering the powers beyond. It is more interested in listening to the wisdom of the internal human spirit than in obeying the commands of external authority. Personal integrity and personal fulfillment take center stage from ancestors and gods. In a setting like this even atheists can be comfortably spiritual. . . .⁹

I must confess, I cannot compete with the clamor of golden-calf spirituality. Yes, you heard me right—golden-calf spirituality. After all, what could be more appealing to our modern taste than “you can have your way” spirituality? It is far more comfortable to shape the gods into images of our choosing than it is to submit to being shaped into the image of a God who chooses us. Golden calves—we fashion them as we please and then we prostitute ourselves to them. The choice today is the same as the choice presented to Israel more than three millennia ago: prostrate ourselves before the one and only LORD God, or prostitute ourselves to the gods of our own making.

The book *God Is No Fool* is a collection of ninety-nine meditations written by Lois Cheney. There is one meditation that I have read more times than any of the others;

⁹Rabbi Sherwin Wine, “Secular Spirituality Finds Its Place in the World,” *The Detroit News* (October 21, 2001): 15A, 20A.

perhaps more times than all other ninety-eight combined. It is the meditation that gives the book its title. It reads as follows:

They say that God has infinite patience,
And that is a great comfort.

They say God is always there,
And that is a deep satisfaction.

They say that God will always take you back,
And I get lazy in that certitude.

They say that God never gives up,
And I count on that.

They say you can go away for years and years,
And he'll be there, waiting, when you come back.

They say you can make mistake after mistake,
And God will always forgive and forget.

They say lots of things,
These people who never read the Old Testament.

There comes a time,
A definite, for sure time,
When God turns around.

I don't believe God shed his skin
When Christ brought in the New Testament;
Christ showed us a new side of God,
And it is truly wonderful.

But he didn't change God.
God remains forever and ever
And that God
is
no
fool.¹⁰

Yahweh . . . He is El Qanna—the Jealous God. He demands nothing less than our full devotion, and He promises nothing less than all His love. And this very God sacrificed His one and only Son that you and I might escape His wrath and instead experience His love. And this Son, Jesus Christ, like His father made it crystal clear that He would tolerate no rivals. He declared, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6, NIV). Through Jesus’ death on

¹⁰Lois A. Cheney, *God Is No Fool* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969), 55-56.

a cross, we can live in the forgiveness and the fellowship of the Father. The cross . . . the cross . . . the supreme manifestation of God's abounding love for the sinner and the supreme manifestation of God's awful wrath against sin. Yahweh—El Qanna—He is revealed there . . . there on the cross.

-
- Achtemeier, Elizabeth. *Preaching Hard Texts of the Old Testament*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998.
- The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. 6 Vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992
- Anderson, Bernhard W. *Understanding the Old Testament*. 4th ed. Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, 1998.
- Arnold, Bill T. "The Weidner Chronicle and the Idea of History in Israel and Mesopotamia." Pages 129-148 in *Faith, Tradition, and History: Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context*. Edited by Alan R. Millard, James K. Hoffmeier, and David W. Baker. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994.
- Baly, Denis. *God and History in the Old Testament*. New York: Harper & Row, 1976.
- Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1977.
- Blenkinsopp, Joseph. *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible*. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- Bowman, Craig. Instructor of Old Testament and Hebrew at Rochester College, Rochester Hills, Michigan. Special thanks for his assistance in the translation of the Hebrew text.
- Brown, Colin, ed. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. 3 Vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975-1978.
- Brown, F., S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs. *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1979.
- Childs, Brevard S. *The Book of Exodus*. Old Testament Library. Louisville: Westminster, 1974.
- Childs, Brevard S. *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979.
- Durham, John I. *Exodus*. Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 3. Waco: Word, 1987.
- Fretheim, Terence E. *Exodus*. Interpretation. Louisville: John Knox, 1991.
- Garr, W. Randall. "The Grammar and Interpretation of Exodus 6:3." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111 (1992): 385-408.
- Gowan, Donald E. *Theology in Exodus: Biblical Theology in the Form of a Commentary*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994.
- Hamilton, Victor P. *Handbook on the Pentateuch*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982.
- Holladay, William L. *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971.
- The Holy Bible*. The following translations were used: The Message, NASB, NCV, NEB, NIV, NKJV, NLT, NRSV, RSV, Tanakh, TEV.
- Jenni, Ernst, and Claus Westermann. *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*. 3 Vols. Trans. by Mark E. Biddle. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997
- Longman, Tremper, III. *Making Sense of the Old Testament: Three Crucial Questions*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998.
- McKenzie, Steven L. *Covenant*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000.
- Martens, Elmer A. *God's Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981.
- Mettinger, Tryggve N. D. *In Search of God: The Meaning and Message of the Everlasting Names*. Trans. by Frederick H. Cryer. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988.
- Miller, Patrick D. *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994.

- Mills, Mary E. *Images of God in the Old Testament*. Collegeville: Michael Glazier Book/Liturgical Press, 1998.
- Ortlund, Raymond C., Jr. *Whoredom: God's Unfaithful Wife in Biblical Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.
- Owens, John Joseph. *Analytical Key to the Old Testament*. Vol. 1: Genesis-Joshua. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989.
- Roberts, J. J. M. "The Hand of Yahweh." *Vetus Testamentum* 21 (1971): 244-251.
- Sarna, Nahum M. *Exodus*. JPS Torah Commentary. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991.
- Sarna, Nahum M. *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel*. New York: Schocken, 1996.
- Septuaginta*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1979.
- Shelly, Rubel. *Living by the Rules: The Contemporary Value of the Ten Commandments*. Nashville: 20th Century Christian, 1982.
- Snaith, Norman H. *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*. New York: Schocken, 1964.
- Spicq, Ceslas. *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*. 3 Vols. Trans. by James E. Ernest. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994.
- VanGemenen, Willem A., ed. *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*. 5 Vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.